THE WOOING OF THE WIND.

Bliss Carman in Lippincott's Magazine.

Rose of dusk, didst ever
Regard the sea's refrain?
That is no love that never
Returns with time again.

Because I am the saddest
Of things beneath the sun,
Because thou art the gladdest
That ever he looked on,—

Because no ways to wander
Allure me any more,
With white sea dreams to ponder
All day beside thy door,—

Because there's not a rover
But wearies on a day,
And not a faithless lover
But sorrow doth repay,—

I rove the world of shadows,
A wraith of the blue rain,
And in the dawn's deep meadows
Return to thee again.

PIETRO GHISLERI.

BY F. MARION CRAWFORD.

Author of "Saracinesca," "The Three Fates," etc.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

The state of certainty in regard to Adele's doings at which Ghisleri had now arrived seemed to make any action in the matter useless if not practically impossible. He ascertained without difficulty the law concerning such attempts to do bodily injury, as he was quite sure she had made. The crime was homicide when the attempt led to fatal results. There was no doubt of that. On the other hand, even if it should seem advisable to bring Adele to justice, and to involve both the Savelli and Gerano families in an affair which would socially ruin them for at least one whole generation in case Adele were convicted, yet the positive proofs would be very hard to produce, and the ultimate good to be gained would be infinitesimally small compared with the injury done to innocent persons. The best course was to maintain the most absolute secrecy and to discourage as far as possible any allusions others might make to the mystery of the lost letter. Ghisleri, too, understood human nature far too well to suppose that Adele had in the first instance desired or expected to kill Herbert Arden. She had most probably only meant to cause Laura the greatest possible anxiety and trouble by bringing a dangerous illness upon her husband. Scarlet fever, as is well known, is not often fatal to adults in Italy, and such cases as Arden's, in which death ensues within eight and forty hours, are so rare as to be phenomenal in any part of the world. But Ghisleri had found them described in the book he chanced to possess, under the head of "Rudimentary Cases Ending Fatally"—and it was there stated that they were the consequence of a very violent infection. Adele, in practising some one of the methods of fever-poisoning which the great professor had described so vividly at Gouache's, had, of course, not known exactly what result she was about to produce. She had assuredly not foreseen that Arden would die, and had very probably not even believed that he would really take the fever at all. As for the wish to do harm, Pietro explained that naturally enough. He knew that the dinner of reconciliation must have been brought about by the Prince of Gerano, and he guessed that in the interview between the father and the daughter Adele had been deeply humiliated by being forced to yield and by the necessity of openly retracting what she had said of Arden and Laura. In a woman whose impulses were naturally bad, and whose mind had never been very well balanced, it was not very hard to explain how the idea had presented itself if chance had at that moment thrown the necessary information into her way. The whole story was now sufficiently connected from first to last, and Ghisleri, as he thought over it, saw how all the details he remembered confirmed the theory. He recollected the doctor's remarks about the case, and how surprised he had been by its extraordinary violence. He recalled vividly all that he had heard of Adele's behavior immediately after the dinner party, and his own impression of her appearance when he had met her in the street and had recommended her a soporific was extremely distinct, as well as her behavior whenever, in the course of two past years, he had said anything intentionally or not which she could construe as referring to her crime. The chain was complete from the beginning to the end and her present dangerous state was the direct consequence of the very first slander she had cast on Laura Arden.

What Ghisleri felt when he was fully persuaded that Adele Savelli had brought about the death of his best friend is not easily described. In natures like his the desire for vengeance is very strong—strongest when most justified. The instinct which demands life for life is always present somewhere in the natural human heart and, on the whole, the great body of human opinion has in most ages approved it and given it shape in law—or sanction, where laws have been or still are rudimentary. Ghisleri was not therefore either unusually cruel or bloodthirsty in wishing that Adele might expiate her crime to the full. But in this case, even if capital punishment had not been abolished in Italy, the law would not have applied it, and personal revenge without the law's assistance being out of the question in the nineteenth century, Pietro could hardly have invented a worse fate than actually awaited his friend's murderess. There was a grand logic, as it seemed to him, in the implacable retribution which was pursuing and must before long overtake Adele Savelli. He could enjoy the whole satisfaction of the most complete vengeance without as much as raising a finger to hasten it. That was the first result of his cogitations, and he was very well pleased with it. He bought books containing accounts of morphinism and calmly tried to calculate how long Adele had to live, what precise phenomena her end would exhibit, and to decide whether she would lose her mind altogether before the physical consumption of the tissues destroyed her body.

But before long he became disgusted with himself, for he was not cruel by nature, though capable of doing very cruel things under the influence of passion. It was probably not from any inherent nobility of character, but rather out of the commonest pity combined with a rather uncommon though material refinement of taste, that he at last turned from his study and contemplation of Adele's sufferings and resolutely put her and them out of his mind.

"Heaven can do with her what it pleases. I will think no more about it," he said to himself one day, and the saying was profoundly characteristic of the man.

He had never been an unbeliever since the last years of his boyhood, when, like many boys in our times, he had already fancied himself a man, and had thought it manly to believe in nothing. But such a state of mind was not really natural to him, nor even possible for any length of time. Of his intimate convictions he never spoke, for they concerned no one, and no one had a right to judge him. But that he really had certain convictions no one who knew him well could doubt, and on certain occasions they undeniably guided his actions.

Laura Arden had not heard even the faintest hint about the lost letter, and it became one of Ghisleri's principal occupations to keep the story from her. She was, of course, not in the way of hearing it unless some unusually indiscreet person should take pains to acquaint her with it; but such people are unfortunately not uncommon, and Pietro knew that at any moment Laura might hear something which would make her look at her husband's death in a new light. The shock would be terrible, he knew, and he did not like to think of it. He little suspected that when the story reached her ears it would be so distorted as to convey a very different meaning to her, nor did he guess the part he himself was to play in what followed.

A month and more passed away without any incident of importance. He saw Laura constantly and met Adele occasionally in society. The latter always met him with a great affectation of cordiality, but evidently avoided conversing with him alone. Her expression when she looked at him was invariably smiling, but the eyes which had grown so strange under the daily influence of the poison had something in them on the rare occasions when they met his that might have warned him had he suspected danger. But he anticipated nothing of that sort for himself. He supposed rather that she felt herself to be in his power and feared him, so that she would carefully avoid doing anything which might provoke him. But in this he was very much mistaken. He neither knew that she believed her lost letter to be in a safe place, where no one could find it and where it must ultimately turn to dust, nor realized how far her mind was already unbalanced. Still less did he understand all the causes for which she so sincerely hated him. Even had he felt that she was an active adversary, he would have undervalued her power to do him harm.

Adele meditated her last stroke a long time. Though Ghisleri had frightened her terribly during the conversation she had herself asked for on that memorable evening in Casa Montevarchi, he had also suggested the very idea of which she had long been in search. She turned it over, twisted it, so to say, into every possible shape, and at last reached a definite plan. There was already something of madness in the scheme she ultimately adopted, and which she carried out with an ingenuity and secrecy almost beyond belief.

Laura Arden was surprised one morning by receiving a letter addressed to her in an unknown handwriting, which she at once judged to be that of a woman, though it was small, cramped and irregular.

"Madam," the letter began, "I apply to your well-known charitable heart in the greatest conceivable distress. My husband, who was for a long time in the service of one of the noblest Roman families, as a clerk in the steward's office, lost his position in the ruin which has lately overtaken that most excellent house. He walks the streets from sunrise to sunset in search of employment, and returns at night to contemplate the spectacle of misery afforded him by his starving family. Misery is upon us, and there is no bread, nor even the commonest food, such as day laborers eat, with which to quiet the piteous cries of our children."

There followed much more to the same effect. The style was quite that of a woman of the class to which the writer claimed to belong, and the appeal for help, though couched in rather flowery language, had a ring of truth in it which touched Laura's heart. It had, indeed, been copied, with a few alterations, from a genuine letter which Adele Savelli had chanced to receive. The concluding sentences stated that the applicant, who had never known poverty before, was ashamed, for her husband's sake, to give the name which had so long been respectable. If Lady Herbert Arden was moved to pity and would give anything—the very smallest charity—would she put it into an envelope, and send it to "Maria B.," addressed to the general postoffice?

Laura hesitated a moment, and then slipped a five-franc note with her card into an envelope, and addressed it as requested in the letter. On the next day but one she received a second, full of gratitude, and expressing the most humble and sincere thanks for the money, but not asking for anything more. This also was copied from a genuine communication, and the style was unmistakably the same. Adele had answered the first by sending a larger sum than Laura had given, in order that the reply might be relatively effusive.

A week passed, and Laura heard no more from Maria B., and had almost forgotten the incident when a third letter came, imploring further assistance. Laura was far from rich, and gave all she could in the way of charity to such poor people as she considered to have an especial claim upon her consideration. On this occasion, therefore, she made no reply. This was exactly what Adele expected, and suited her plan admirably. After a sufficient time had elapsed to make it quite plain that Laura did not intend to answer the second appeal, another communication came through the post.

The tone this time was, if possible, more humble and piteous than before. After enumerating and descanting upon the horrible sufferings the family underwent, and declaring that unless some charitable Christian would give assistance in some shape, even were it but a loaf of bread, the whole household must inevitably perish, and after adding that father, mother and all four children—the latter of tender age—expected to be turned into the street by a hard-hearted landlord, Maria B. made a distinct proposition. Contemptible as it must appear in the eyes of a great and rich English lady to take advantage of having discovered a secret in order to beg a charity, necessity knows no law. The ex-clerk was in possession of certain letters written by a near connection of Lady Herbert's to a person with whom the latter was intimately acquainted, and whom, it was commonly reported, she was about to marry. These letters, five in number, referred to a transaction of a very peculiar nature, which it would be advisable not to make public, for the sake of the persons concerned. It was very far from Maria B.'s thoughts to degrade herself by setting a price upon the documents. If Lady Herbert cared to possess them they should be hers, and any small reward she might be willing to give would be humbly and thankfully accepted. In order that she might judge of the nature of the letters in question, Maria B. inclosed a copy of the one last written before the transaction alluded to had been concluded. Lady Herbert would be able to understand the names from the initials used by the copyist.

Laura, even then, did not suspect in the least what she was about to find. She unfolded the separate sheet which had dropped from the letter when she had opened it, and began to read with an expression of curiosity and some amusement:

My Dear G:—Of course I understand your position perfectly and I have known you long enough to be sure that you will take every advantage of it, short of doing me an open injury, which would hardly be for your own good. I know perfectly well, also, where you found the paper at Gerano, for I went to the spot myself to look for it, and it was gone. You had been there before me—by chance, no doubt, since you could not possibly guess that there was anything there worth finding. It is quite clear that if you really circulate that letter among our mutual friends, you will subject me to the ridicule of all Rome and to an amount of humiliation which I am not prepared to endure. You see I am quite willing to come to terms. But I think your demand is really out of all proportion to the circumstances. A hundred thousand francs for a miserable scrap of paper! Absurd, my friend. You are not the accomplished scoundrel I took you for if you suppose that I will pay that. Fifty thousand is the most I can possibly offer you. If you are satisfied with that, wear a gardenia in your coat to-night at the Frangipani dance. As for my behavior in public, you need not warn me. I can keep my countenance almost as well as you. A. S.

The letter dropped from Laura's hands before she had read to the end. An instant later she took it up again and tore it to the smallest shreds. She had heard of cases of blackmail, but never of anything so infamous as this. She did not hesitate long, but wrote within the hour a few lines to Maria B. in which she warned the latter not to dare to proceed with her abominable fraud, and rather rashly threatened her with the law if she attempted anything further of the same kind. As for speaking to Ghisleri about it, the idea never crossed her thoughts.

Again three days passed. Then one morning the post brought a large and rather bulky letter, registered and addressed in a round, ornate, clerk's hand. Adele had got the address written at the postoffice on pretence that her own handwriting was not legible enough. Laura supposed that the missive contained business communication from her banker, and opened it without the least suspicion. It contained three grayish-blue envelopes of the paper now very commonly used for daily correspondence. All three were opened in a peculiar way, and precisely as Laura had more than once seen Ghisleri open a letter in her presence. He had a habit of tearing off a very thin strip along one edge, with so much neatness as almost to give the paper the appearance of having been cut with a sharp instrument. All three were addressed to him, moreover, in Adele Savelli's handwriting, without any attempt at disguise. Laura held them in her hand, turned them over, and saw the tiny prince's coronet over a single initial which Adele had used for years. There was no mistaking the authenticity of everything about the envelopes. Laura's heart stood still. There was no word of explanation from her former correspondent, but Laura recollected that the latter had said that the letters were five in number, whereas these were only three. It was clear that the remaining two had been kept back as a tacit threat in case the request for money were not complied with. Laura's first impulse was to treat them as she had treated the copy Maria B. had at first sent her, and to tear them into minute shreds, without as much as glancing at the contents. But a moment's reflection made her change her mind. She slipped them all back into the large envelope and locked them up in the drawer of her writing-table, putting the key into her pocket. Then she wrote a note to Ghisleri, asking him to come and see her as soon as possible, and dispatched Donald with it immediately.

She sat down to wait, strangely affected by what had happened. It is hardly to be wondered at if the whole thing seemed inexplicable. Even at first she could not suspect Pietro Ghisleri. She would hardly have believed him capable of such an action as he was accused of had she seen him write the letters to which these of Adele were supposed to be answers. And yet those answers were there in the drawer, within reach of her hand. She had not the slightest doubt but that the original of which she had already seen a copy was among them. She could take it out and read it if she pleased. It was damning evidence—but she would not have believed in Ghisleri's guilt for twice as much proof as that. The one thing she was forced to admit was that Adele had really written the letters, though when, or for what purpose, or in what connection, she could not guess. The whole thing might turn out to be some Carnival jest carried on by correspondence, and of which she had never heard. That was the only explanation she could find, as she waited for Pietro Ghisleri. He came within the hour.

"Has anything happened?" he asked, as he took her hand. "I thought there was something anxious about your note."

"Something very strange has happened," she answered, looking into his bright blue eyes, and acknowledging for the hundredth time that she would believe him in spite of any testimony to the contrary. "Sit down," she said. "I have something to give you which seems to belong to you. I will tell you the story afterward."

She opened the drawer again and handed him the envelope. He looked at it in surprise.

"Am I to read what is inside?" he asked.

"See for yourself."

He took out the letters and looked at them as he had first looked at the outer address. Then, realizing that they were addressed to himself, his expression changed. He recollected Adele's handwriting though she had rarely written to him anything more than an invitation, and he knew the paper on which she wrote. But where or when he had received these particular ones, or how they had got into Laura's hands, was a mystery.

"What are they?" he asked. "Are they old invitations? Why have they been sent to you?"

"I believe them to be forgeries," said Laura, "or else that they refer to some standing jest you and she once may have kept up for a time. I have not read them; but I have read a copy of one of them which was sent me, and I know what they are about. I will tell you the whole story afterward. See for yourself, as I said before."

Ghisleri drew out the first sheet.

"If they are forgeries, they are very cleverly done," he said, with a laugh. "The person has even imitated my way of opening a letter."

His face grew very grave, as Laura watched it while he was reading, and his brow knit together angrily. He read the second and the third, and she could see his anger rising visibly in his eyes as he silently looked at her each time he had finished one of them. When he had reached the end of the last he did not speak for some moments.

"Did you say that you knew what these letters were about?" he asked at length, in a steady, cold voice.

"I think so. I read a copy of one of them almost without knowing what I was doing. Adele pretends that you are trying to get money from her for a letter of hers you found at Gerano."

"Yes, that is what they are about. It is her doing, but it is my fault."

"Your fault!" exclaimed Laura. "But surely there never even was such a letter as she refers to. Do you understand at all?"

"Yes, I understand much too well. She has done this for a distinct purpose. Tell me in the first place one thing. Do you still trust me in the face of such evidence as this?"

"I trust you as much as ever," answered Laura.

"Thank you," he said simply, and he looked into her deep eyes a moment before he continued: "There are two stories to tell, yours and mine. Tell yours first. Tell me how you came by the copy you speak of? Who sent it to you, and when?"

As briefly as she could Laura gave him all the details she could remember from the day she had received the first request for help from Maria B. It was painful to her to repeat what she could of the substance of the copy sent her, but she went through with it to the end.

"That letter is not among these," said Ghisleri, thoughtfully. "It is one of the two which have been kept back for future use. Now let me tell you what I can remember. Do not be surprised that I should never have told you the story before. Since you can trust me in such a matter as this, you will believe me when I say that there was a good reason for not telling you."

He gave as concise an account of the conversation which had taken place between himself and Adele at the Montevarchis' party, omitting only what referred to his own suspicions concerning the manner of Arden's death. If possible, he meant always to conceal that side of the question from Laura. But it was necessary to tell her something about the document constantly mentioned in the letters.

"There is a story in circulation," he said, "to the effect that when Donna Adele was ill at Gerano, nearly two years ago, she was unwilling to confess to the parish priest, and wrote a confession to be sent to her confessor in Rome. A servant stole it, says the story, and it is supposed to be in existence, passing from hand to hand in society. It is quite possible that she believes that I bought it of the thief. But I doubt even that. She has most probably regained possession of it before attempting this stroke. And this is almost what I suggested to her in a general way, and laughing, as one way of ruining a man. I remember my own words—an injury that would make a woman who loves a man turn upon him. Substitute friendship for love, and the case is almost identical."

"Yes," Laura answered thoughtfully. "Substitute friendship for love." She hardly knew why she repeated the words, and a moment later a faint color rose in her cheeks.

"She has done this thing, therefore, with the deliberate intention of ruining me in your eyes," said Ghisleri.

"And she has utterly failed to do so, or even to change my opinion of you a little. But it is very well done. There are people who would have been deceived. The idea of forging—it is not forging—of writing imaginary letters to you herself is masterly."

"I do not think she is quite sane. The morphine she takes is beginning to affect her brain. She does not always know what she is doing."

"You take far too merciful and charitable a view," answered Laura, with some scorn.

"No, on the contrary, if she were quite what she used to be, she would be more dangerous—she would not make mistakes. Two or three years ago she would not have gratuitously thrown herself into danger as she has now. She would not have made such a failure as this."

"And what a failure it is! Do you know? It was very puzzling at first. To know positively that you never could have received those letters, and yet to see that they are still in existence, addressed to you, and opened in your peculiar way. I felt as though I were in a dream."

"I wonder you did not feel inclined to believe me guilty. The evidence was almost as strong as it could be. In your position I should have hesitated."

"Would you have believed such a thing of me, if it had been just as it is, only if the letters had gone to you instead of to me?" asked Laura.

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Ghisleri, with strong emphasis. "That would be quite another matter."

"I do not see that it would. You would have been exactly in my position, as you hinted a moment ago."

"I was not thinking of you. The day I do not believe in you I shall not believe in God. You are the last thing I have left to believe in—and the best, my dear friend."

He was very much in earnest, as Laura knew from the tone of his voice. But she would not look at him just then, because she felt that he was looking at her, and she preferred that their eyes should not meet.

"Will you do anything about this?" she asked, after a pause, and not referring to what he had last said. "Will you destroy those vile things?"

"Since they are addressed to me, I suppose I have a right to do so," answered Ghisleri, and he began slowly to tear up the sheets of the first letter.

"There can be no doubt about their being genuine?" asked Laura, with sudden emotion.

"Not at all, I should say. But you are the best judge of that. You should know her handwriting better than I. If you like," he added, with a short laugh, "I will go and show them to her and ask her if she wrote them. Shall I?"

"Oh, no! Do not do that!" exclaimed Laura, who knew that he was quite capable of following such a course as he suggested.

There was apparently nothing to be done. Laura believed that any attempt to make use of the two remaining letters would be as abortive as the first, and there could certainly be no use in keeping those which had been sent. On the contrary, it was possible that if they were preserved, chance might throw them into hands in which they might become far more dangerous than they were.

"Shall I write to Maria B., wherever she is?" asked Laura.

"You might send her another five francs," answered Ghisleri, grimly. "It would show her how much you value the documents she has for sale."

"I will," said Laura, with a laugh. "How furious she will be. Of course it is Adele who gets these things."

"Of course. Five francs is quite enough."

And Laura, little knowing or guessing how it would be used against her, sent a five-franc note with her card in an envelope and addressed it. On the card she had written in pencil, "For Maria B., with best thanks."

"There is one other thing I would like to do," she said. "But I do not know whether you would approve. It would give me such satisfaction—you know I am only a woman, after all."

"What is that?" asked Ghisleri, "and why should you need my approval?"

"Only this. To-morrow, and perhaps the next day, when she is quite sure I must have received those letters, I would like to drive with you in an open carriage where we should be sure to meet Adele. I would give anything to see her face."

Ghisleri laughed. The womanly side of Laura's nature was becoming more apparent of late, and its manifestations pleased and surprised him. He thought Laura would hardly have seemed human if she had not wished to let Adele see how completely the attempt had failed which she had so ingeniously planned and carried out.

"If anything would make the town talk, that would," he answered. "The only way to manage it would be to get the Princess to go with you and then take me as—" He stopped short, rather awkwardly.

"I should rather go without her," said Laura, turning her face away to hide her amusement at the slip of the tongue of which he had been guilty.

In Rome for Ghisleri to be seen driving with the Princess of Gerano and her daughter would have been almost equivalent to announcing his engagement to Laura.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Adele had not anticipated such complete failure in the first instance. The five-franc note with Laura Arden's card told her plainly enough what her step-sister thought of the matter, but she had no means of finding out whether Ghisleri had been informed of what she had done or not, and her efforts to extract information from him when she met him were not successful. His tone and his manner toward her were precisely the same as formerly, and he was as ready as ever to enter into desultory conversation with her; but if she ventured to lead the talk in such a direction as to find out what she wanted to know, he instantly met her with a counter-allusion to her doings which frightened her and silenced her effectually. So the months passed in a sort of petty skirmishing which led to no positive result, and she secretly planned some further step which should complete those she had already taken, reverse Laura's judgment, and completely ruin Pietro Ghisleri with her and before the world. The uneasy workings of her unsettled brain grew more and more tortuous every day, until at last she felt unable to reason the question out without the help of some experienced person. She felt quite sure that there must be some way out of all her difficulties, by a short cut to victory, and that a clever man, a good lawyer, for instance, if he could be deceived into believing the story she had concocted, would know how to make use of it against her enemies. The difficulty was two-fold. In the first place she must put together such a body of evidence as no experienced advocate could refuse as ground for an action at law, and, secondly, she must find the said advocate and explain the whole matter to him from her own point of view. The action would be brought in self-defence against Pietro Ghisleri, who would be accused of having systematically attempted to levy blackmail. That was the crude form in which the idea suggested itself to Adele when she set to work.

Her conviction now was that Pietro was only partially aware of the substance of the lost confession, and that the letter containing it was still at Gerano. This being the case, she could freely speak of it to her lawyer and describe the contents in any way she pleased, so as to turn the existence of the document to her own advantage. In the letters she had sent Laura and in the other two which she kept by her for future use, she had been careful never to say anything conclusive. Maria B. had indeed spoken of the transaction as being ended, but that could be interpreted as the unfounded supposition of a person not fully acquainted with the facts, and desirous of making money out of them as far as possible. The hardest thing would probably be to produce the woman who was supposed to have written to Laura, in case she should be needed. Money well bestowed, however, would do much toward stimulating the memory of some indigent and unscrupulous person, and the part to be played would, after all, be a small and insignificant one. On the other hand, the weak point in the case would be that Adele, while able to produce an unlimited number of her own letters to Ghisleri, would not have a single line of his writing to show. She could, indeed, fall back upon her own natural sense of caution, and declare that she had destroyed all he had written, in the mistaken belief that it would be safer to do so, and her lawyer could taunt his opponent with his folly in not doing likewise; but that would, after all, be rather a poor expedient. Or it might be pretended that Pietro had invariably written to her in a feigned handwriting signing himself, perhaps, with a single initial, as a precaution in case his letters should fall into the wrong hands. In that case she could produce whatever she chose. The best possible plan would be to extract one or two short notes from him upon which an ambiguous construction might be put by the lawyers. All this, Adele reflected, would need considerable time, and several months must elapse before she could expect to be ready. Her mind, too, worked spasmodically, and she was subject to long fits of apathy and extreme depression in the intervals between her short hours of abnormal activity. She knew that this was the result of the morphine she took in such quantities, and she resolved to make a great effort to cure herself of the fatal habit, if it were not already too late.

As has been said more than once, Adele Savelli had possessed a very determined will, and it had not yet been altogether destroyed. Having once made up her mind to free herself if she could, she made the attempt bravely and systematically. The result was that, in the course of several months, she had reduced the amount of her daily doses considerably. The suffering was great, but the object to be gained was great also, and she steeled herself to endure all that a woman could. She was encouraged, also, by the fact that her mind began to act more regularly and seemed more reliable. Physically, she was growing very weak and was becoming almost emaciated. Francesco Savelli watched her narrowly, and it was his opinion that she could not last long. The Prince of Gerano was very anxious about her all through the spring which followed the events last described, and his wife, though she was far less fond of Adele than in former times, could not but feel a sorrowful regret as she saw the young life that had begun so brightly wearing itself away before her eyes. But the Princess had consolations in another direction. Laura Arden seemed to grow daily more lovely in her mature beauty, and Herbert was growing out of his babyhood into a sturdy little boy of phenomenal strength and of imperturbable good temper. Laura was headstrong where Ghisleri was concerned, but in all other respects she was herself still.

The first consequence of Adele's attempt to break the strong friendship which united Laura and Pietro was to draw them still more closely together, and to make Laura, at least, more defiant of the world's opinion than ever. As for Ghisleri, he almost forgot to ask himself questions. The time to separate for the summer was drawing near, and he knew, when he thought of it, what a different parting this one would be from the one which had preceded it a year earlier. But he tried to think of the present and not of the weary months of solitude he looked forward to between June and November or December. He remembered, in spite of himself, how he had more than once enjoyed the lonely life, even refusing invitations to pleasant places rather than lose a single week of an existence so full of charm. But another interest had been growing, slowly, deep-sown, spreading its roots in silence and fastening itself about his heart while he had not even suspected that it was there at all. Little by little, without visible manifestation, the strong thing had drawn more strength from his own life, mysteriously absorbing into itself the springs of thought and the sources of emotion, unifying them and assimilating them all into something which was a part, and was soon to be the chief part, of his being. And now, above the harrowed surface of that inner ground on which such fierce battles had been fought throughout his years of storm, a soft shoot raised its delicate head, not timidly, but quietly and unobtrusively, to meet the warm sunshine of the happier days to come. He saw it and knew it, and held his peace, dreading it and yet loving it, for it was love itself: but not knowing truly what the little blade would come to, whether it was to bloom all at once into a bright and poisonous flower of evil, bringing to him the death of all possible love forever; or whether it would grow up slowly, calm and fair, from leaf to shrub, from shrub to sapling, from sapling at last to tree, straight, tall, and strong, able to face tempest and storm without bending its lofty head, rich to bear for him in the end the stately blossom and the heavenly fruit of passionate true love.

For before the day of parting came Pietro Ghisleri knew that he loved Laura Arden. Ever since that moment when she had quietly given him Adele's letter and had told him that she would believe no evil of him, he had begun to suspect that she was no longer what she had been to him once and what she had remained so long—a friend, kind, almost affectionate, for whom he would give all he had, but only a friend after all. It was different now. The thought of bidding Laura goodby, even for a few months, sent a thrill of pain through his heart which he had not expected to feel—the small, sharp pain which tells a man the truth about a woman and himself as nothing else can. The prospect of the lonely summer was dreary.

Ghisleri was surprised and almost startled. During nearly two years and a half he had honestly believed that he could never love again, and if a sincere wish, formulated in the shape he unconsciously chose, could be called a prayer, he earnestly prayed that so long as he lived he might not feel what he had felt very strongly twice, at least, since he had been a boy. But such a man could hardly expect that such a wish, or prayer, could be granted or heard, so long as he was spending many hours of each succeeding week in the company of Laura Arden. In the full strength of manhood, passionate, sensitive beneath a cold exterior, always attracted by women and almost always repelled by men, Pietro Ghisleri could hardly expect that in one moment the capacity for loving should be wholly rooted out and destroyed by something like an act of will, and as the consequence of his being disappointed and disgusted by his own fickleness. The new passion might turn out to be greater or less than the two which had hitherto disturbed his existence, but it could hardly be greater than the first. It would necessarily be different from either, in that it would be hopeless from the beginning, as he thought. For where he was very sincere he was rarely very confident in himself, if the stake was woman's love; a fact more common with men who are at once sensitive and strong than is generally known.

But his first impulse was not to go away and escape from temptation as it would have been some time earlier. There was no reason for doing that, as he had reflected before, when he had considered the advisability of breaking off an intercourse with Laura for the sake of silencing the world's idle chatter. He was perfectly free to love her, to tell her so, if he chose. No one could blame him for wishing to marry her; at most he might be thought foolish for desiring anything so very improbable as that she should accept him. But he was quite indifferent to what any one might think of him excepting Laura herself. One resolution only he made and did his best to keep, and it was a good one. He made up his mind that he would not make love to her, as he understood the meaning of the term. Possibly, as he told himself with a little scorn, this was no resolution at all, but only a way of expressing his conviction that he was quite unable to do what he so magnanimously refused to attempt. For his instinct told him that his love for Laura had already taken a shape which differed wholly from all former passions, one unfamiliar to him, one which would need a new expression if it continued to be sincere. But that he doubted. He was quite ready to admit that when Laura came back in the autumn this early beginning of love would have disappeared again, and that the old strong friendship would be found in its place, solid, firmly based and unchanged, a permanent happiness and a constant satisfaction. He was no longer a boy, to imagine that the first breath of love was the forerunner of an all destroying storm in which he must perish, or of a clear, fair wind before which the ship of his life was to run her straight course to the haven of death's peace. He had seen too much fickleness in himself and in others to believe in any such things; but if he had anticipated either it would have been the tempest. On the whole, he did the wisest thing he could. He changed nothing in his manner toward Laura, and he waited as calmly as he was able to see what the end would be. Once only before Laura went away the conversation turned upon love, and oddly enough it was Laura who brought up the subject.

She had been talking about little Herbert, as she often did, planning out his future according to her own wishes and making it happy in her own way, even to sketching the wife he was to win some five and twenty years hence.

"I would like her to be very fair," she said. "Herbert will be dark, as I am, and they say that contrasts attract each other most permanently. But of course, though she must be beautiful, she must have ever so many other good points besides. In the first place, she must be capable of loving him with all her heart and soul. I suppose that is really the hardest thing of all to find."

"The 'one-great-passion' sort of a person, you mean, I fancy," observed Ghisleri, with a smile. "A rare bird—I agree with you."

"I doubt whether the individual exists," said Laura. "Except by accident, of course, or when the course of true love runs so very smoothly that it would need superhuman ingenuity to fall off it."

"You are a constant revelation to me!" Ghisleri laughed, and looked at her.

"What is there surprising about what I said? You are not a believer in the universal stability of the human heart, are you?"

"Hardly that! But women very often are—at first. And then, when they see that change is possible, they are apt to say that there is no such thing as true love at all, whereas we know that there is."

"In other words, you think that I take the sensible view. After all, what is the use of expecting humanity to be superhuman?"

"I always like the way in which you put things," said Ghisleri, thoughtfully. "That is exactly it. Homo sum. I am neither angel, nor ape, but man, and at present, I believe, no near relation of either."

"And as a man, changeable. So am I, as a woman, I have no doubt. Every one must be, and I do not think it is fair to respect people who do not change at all because they never have the chance."

"One cannot help it. Human nature instinctively places the man who has only loved once above the man who has shown that he can love often. It is connected with the idea of faith and loyalty."

"Often—that is too much. There comes the question of the limit. How often can a man love sincerely?"

"Three times—not more," answered Ghisleri, with conviction.

"Why not two, or four? How can you lay down the law in that way?"

"It is very simple. I think that no love is worth the name which does not influence a man strongly for at least ten years. Any really great passion will do that. But human life is short. Let a man fall in love at twenty, and three periods of ten years each will bring him to fifty. A man who falls in love after he is fifty is a rarity, and generally an object of ridicule. That seems to me a logical demonstration, and I do not see why it should not apply to a woman as well as to a man."

"Yes, I think there is truth in that," said Laura. "At all events, it looks true. Besides, there is something quite reasonable in the idea that a man naturally has three stages, when he is twenty years old, thirty, and forty. I should imagine that the middle stage, while he is still developing, might be the shortest."

It was impossible for Ghisleri to imagine that Laura was referring to his own life, but the remark was certainly very applicable to himself, so far. Would the third stage be permanent, if he really reached it? He was inclined to think that nothing about him had much stability, for within the last two years he had come to accept the fact as something which was part of his nature and from which there was no escape, despise the weakness and hate it as he would. It was a singular coincidence that since he had tormented himself less he had become really less changeable.

A month later he parted from Laura, to all outward appearances as quietly and calmly as in the previous year. If there was any difference, it was in her manner rather than in his. She said almost sadly that she was sorry the time had come, and that she looked forward to the meeting in the autumn as one of the pleasantest things in the future. The words she spoke were almost commonplace, though even if taken literally they conveyed more than she had ever said before. But it was quite clear that she meant more than she said.

When she was gone Ghisleri felt more lonely than he had for years, and every interest seemed to have died out of his existence. He tried to laugh at himself for turning into a boy again, but even that diversion failed him. He could not even find the bitter words it had once amused him, in a grim way, to put together. Then he left Rome, weary of the sights and sounds of the streets, of the solitude of his rooms, of the effort to show some intelligence when he was obliged to talk with an acquaintance. He went to his own place in Tuscany and passed his time in trying to improve the condition of things. He knew something of practical architecture, and he rebuilt a staircase, and restored the vaulting in a part of the little castle to which he had never done anything before, and which had gone to ruin during the last hundred years or more, since it had been inhabited. For he, his father, and his grandfather had been only sons, and his mother having died when he was a mere boy his father had taken a dislike to Torre de Ghisleri and had lived the remainder of his short life in Florence. Hence the general dilapidation of the old place, which was not, however, without beauty. The occupation did him good, and the sight of the old familiar faces of his tenants and a few retainers was pleasant, after facing the museum of society masks during seven months and more. But he felt that even here he could not stay any great length of time without a change, and as the summer advanced his restlessness became extreme.

He came down to Rome for a week in August. The first person he met in the street was Francesco Savelli, who stopped to speak with him. Ghisleri never voluntarily stopped any one.

"How is Donna Adele?" he asked, after they had exchanged first greetings.

"Very nervous," answered Savelli, shaking his head with the air of concern he thought it proper to affect whenever he spoke of his wife's illness. "The nerves are something which no one can understand. I can tell you a story, for instance, about something which happened the other day—to be accurate, in June, when we were at Gerano. Do you remember the oubliette between the guard room and the tower? Yes—my wife said she showed it to you. We were all staying together—all the children, her father, and the Princess and two or three friends. One morning she said she was quite sure that if we took up that slab of stone and lowered a man into the shaft, we should find a skeleton hanging there—Heaven knows what she imagined! The Prince said he had looked into the shaft scores of times when the trapdoor still existed, and there was a bar across the passage to prevent any one from going near; that he himself had ordered the stone to be put where it was and knew all about the place. The only skeleton ever found in the castle had been discovered walled up in the thickness of the north tower, with a little window just opposite the face, so that the individual must have died looking at the hills. Nobody knew anything about it. But my wife insisted, and grew angry, and at last furious. It was of no use, of course. You know the old gentleman—he can be perfectly rigid. He answered that no one should touch the stone, that if she yielded to such ideas once, she would soon wish to pull Gerano to pieces to count the mice, and that if she could persuade my father to knock holes in the walls at Castel Savello, that was the affair of the Savelli, but that so long as he lived she should not make any experiments in excavation under his roof. If you will believe me, she had a fit of anger which brought on an attack of the nerves, and she never went out of her room for three days in consequence. Do you wonder that I am anxious?"

"Certainly not. It would be amazing if you were indifferent. The story gives one the idea that she is subject to delusions. I am very sorry she is no better. Pray remember me to her."

Thereupon Ghisleri passed on, inwardly wondering how long it would be before Adele became quite mad. Two days later he received a note from her. She had heard from her husband that he was in Rome, she said, and wrote to ask a great favor of him. He was doubtless aware of her father's passion for manuscripts, which was well known in Rome. It was reported that a certain dealer had bought Prince Montevarchi's library after the crash and she very much wished to buy a very interesting manuscript of which she often heard her father speak, and which contained an account of the famous, or infamous, Isabella Montevarchi's life, written with her own hand—a sort of confession, in fact. As she did not know the exact title of the document, if it had any, she would call it a confession, though, of course, in a strictly lay sense. Now, she inquired, would Ghisleri, for old friendship's sake, try to obtain it for her at a reasonable price? She knew, of course, that such an original would be expensive, but she was prepared to discuss the terms, if not wholly beyond her means. She sent her note by the carrier, as that was generally quicker than writing by the post, she said. Would Ghisleri kindly answer by the same means? The man would call again on the next day but one. That would perhaps give time to make preliminary inquiries. With which observation, and with best thanks in anticipation of the service he was about to render, Adele called herself most sincerely his.

Ghisleri was not an extremely suspicious man, but he would have given evidence of almost infantine simplicity if he had not seen that there was something wrong about Adele's note. It was certainly very well planned, and if Laura had never shown him the letters Adele had sent her it might very possibly have succeeded. On ascertaining the price set by the dealer on the manuscript, he would probably have written a few words, stating in a business like way the sum for which the so called confession could be bought. In all likelihood, too, he would have only dated his note by the day of the week, omitting altogether the month and the year. He saw at a glance how easily a communication of that kind might have taken such a shape as to be very serviceable against him, and how hard it might have been to show that he was writing about a genuine transaction concerning a manuscript actually for sale. He determined to be very careful.

His first step was to find out the name of the dealer who had bought the Montevarchi library. He next ascertained that what Adele wanted was still unsold, and that he must therefore necessarily enter into correspondence with her. After that he sought out a young lawyer whom he had employed once or twice within the last few years when he had needed legal advice in regard to some trifling point, and laid the whole matter before him. This young man, Ubaldini by name, had rapidly acquired a reputation as a criminal lawyer, and had successfully defended some remarkable cases, but, as he justly observed, acquitted prisoners of the classes in which crimes are common pay very little, and condemned criminals pay nothing at all. He was therefore under the necessity of taking other kinds of business as a means of support. The last murderer who had escaped the law by Ubaldini's eloquence had sent him a bag of beans and a cream cheese, which was all the family could afford in the way of a fee, but upon